

(Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta
The Discourse on the Analysis (of Satipatthana)
[Insight cultivation through watching impermanence]
 (Saṃyutta Nikāya 47.40/5:183)
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(1) Place of the Sutta

The (Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta teaches “satipatthana cultivation” (*satipaṭṭhāna bhāvanā*), a deeper aspect of satipatthana practice (focussing of mindfulness),¹ that is, in terms of the arising and ending of phenomena (ie the perception of impermanence).² In the basic satipatthana practice (*satipaṭṭhāna kamma-t,ṭhāna*), the meditator’s task is to contemplate the particular satipatthana (focus) chosen according to a prescribed pattern. When one has cultivated insight into the arising and ending of the object, one is then ready for deeper insight knowledge.

Sujato summarizes the growth of the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas,³ showing where the (Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta fits in, as follows:

At first, satipatthana was primarily samatha, the way of getting jhana. Then, vipassana was seen to emerge through understanding the process of samadhi in contemplation of dhammas only. Then, for one already well established in all four satipatthanas, vipassana was introduced as an advanced mode of contemplating them.⁴ Next, vipassana was introduced following each of the four sections.⁵

In the Theravāda **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** it became affixed at the end of each exercise within the four sections. Finally in **the Paṭisambhidāmagga**, each item in each section (“earth,” “water,” etc) is contemplated from the start in terms of impermanence, suffering, not-self, repulsion, fading away, cessation, and relinquishment.

The ultimate outcome of this process would be to marginalize or discard the original four objects of satipatthana altogether, abstract the vipassana aspect of satipatthana as constituting the real essence of the practice, and therefore treat satipatthana purely as contemplation of impermanence, etc, on any miscellaneous phenomena. We shall see that this step was in fact taken in the next strata of abhidhamma/commentarial literature. (Sujato 2004b:196; diacritics normalized)

Apparently, it is also the source of “**the basic satipatthana refrain**,”⁶ as we have it today, and which serves as the basic definition of the four focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*):

Here, monks, a monk, . . . dwells exertive [ardent], clearly knowing, mindful, putting away covetousness and displeasure for the world.

The Nettī-p,akarāṇa⁷ attempts to interpret the key terms here to correspond with four of the five spiritual faculties (indriya), that is, to say:

¹ A still more advanced aspect of satipatthana is laid out in **the Rahogata Sutta 1** (S 52.2/5:296 f = SD 12.17).

² See “The Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas” = SD 13 (3.8).

³ SD 13.1, see esp §1c.

⁴ **(Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga S** (S 47.40/5:183).

⁵ **Rahogata S 1** (S 52.2/5:296 f) = SD 12.17.

⁶ Also called “the basic satipatthana formula” (Gethin 2001:45-53, 53-59 & passim) or “the auxiliary formula” (Sujato 2004:113).

⁷ Nett 4.23.

samadhi	=	“putting away covetousness and displeasure for the world”;
effort [energy]	=	“exertive”;
wisdom	=	“clearly knowing”;
mindfulness	=	“mindful.”

“However,” notes **Sujato**, in *A History of Mindfulness*,

the correlation with the spiritual faculties is not particularly close. For example, the spiritual faculty of understanding (*paññā*) is defined as “the understanding of rise and fall that is noble and penetrative, leading to the full ending of suffering,”⁸ clear knowledge (*sampajañña*), although etymologically parallel to “understanding” is never used in this exalted sense, but is usually restricted to the more mundane sense of “awareness of activities in daily life.”

(Sujato 2004b:114)

(2) Satipaṭṭhāna progress

This insight marks the distinction between mere establishing (*upaṭṭhāna*) of satipaṭṭhāna and its total development (*bhāvanā*). The (Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta has three main parts:

- (1) definition of satipaṭṭhāna [3];
- (2) how to cultivate satipaṭṭhāna [4]; and
- (3) how to fully cultivate satipaṭṭhāna (ie by way of the noble eightfold path) [5].

The term *satipaṭṭhāna*, as used in this sutta is best rendered in the abstract singular, simply as “the focusing of mindfulness,” rather than the usual “fourfold focus of mindfulness,” since the instruction is on *how* to focus the mind. On the second part, Bodhi makes note:

This practice is called *satipaṭṭhānabhāvanā* presumably because it carries the practice of contemplation to a deeper level than the basic exercise. In the basic exercise the task set for the meditator is to contemplate the particular establishment chosen according to the prescribed pattern. At this stage, however, one gains insight into the arising and vanishing of the object, which prepares the way for the deeper insight knowledges to emerge. (S:B 1927 n178)

The Sutta explains the shift from mere satipaṭṭhāna to “development” of satipaṭṭhāna by way of contemplating the nature of arising and ending of phenomena. Analayo notes the important of this instruction:

This passage underlies the importance of the “refrain” for a proper development of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Mere awareness of the various objects listed under the four *satipaṭṭhānas* might not suffice for the task of developing penetrative insight. What is additionally required is to move on to a comprehensive and equanimous vision of impermanence. (Analayo 2003:104 f)

The (Satipaṭṭhāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta is missing from the Chinese Āgamas.⁹

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⁸ S 48.9/SĀ 647.

⁹ Cf AKANUMA Chizen, *The Comparative Catalogue of Chinese Āgamas & Pāli Nikāyas*, (repr 1990), 1929: 127.

The Discourse on the Analysis (of Satipatthana) (S 47.40/5:183)

(1) Basic satipatthana

[183] 2 Monks, I will teach you the satipatthana [the focussing of mindfulness],¹⁰ and the cultivation of satipatthana, and the way leading to the cultivation of satipatthana. Listen to it.

3 (A) And what, monks, is **satipatthana [the focusing of mindfulness]**?

Here, monks,

(1) a monk dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the body in the body, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;

(2) a monk dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating feelings in the feelings, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;

(3) a monk dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the mind in the mind, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;

(4) a monk dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating dharmas [phenomena] in the dharmas, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

This is called satipatthana.

(2) The cultivation of satipatthana

4 (B) And what, monks, is the cultivation of satipatthana [the focussing of mindfulness]?

(1) Here, monks, a monk dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the nature of arising in *the body*;¹¹ he dwells contemplating the nature of ending in the body; he dwells contemplating the nature of arising and ending in the body, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

(2) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the nature of arising in *feelings*; he dwells contemplating the nature of ending in feelings; he dwells contemplating the nature of arising and ending in feelings, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

(3) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the nature of arising in *the mind*; he dwells contemplating the nature of ending in the mind; he dwells contemplating the nature of arising and ending in the mind, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

(4) He monks dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the nature of arising in *dharmas*; he dwells contemplating the nature of ending in dharmas; he dwells contemplating the nature of arising and ending in dharmas, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

This is called the cultivation of satipatthana.

(3) The way leading to the cultivation of satipatthana

5 (C) And what, monks, is **the way leading to the cultivation of satipatthana**?

It is this noble eightfold path,¹² that is,

¹⁰ *Satipaṭṭhanañ ca*. Here it is singular, and tr accordingly.

¹¹ *Samudaya,dhammānupassī kāyasmīñ viharatī*. According to Bodhi, this phrase is usu tr as “‘he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors’ (as at M:ÑB 149), on the assumption that the compound contains a plural, *samudaya,dhammā*. A plural sense, however, is not mandatory, and it is more consistent with the use of a suffix – *dhamma* elsewhere to take it as meaning ‘subject to’ or ‘having the nature of’ here as well. At S 22.126/3:171 f *samudaya,dhamma, vaya,dhamma*, and *samudaya,vaya,dhamma* serve as *bahubbīhi* (adjectival) compounds in apposition to each of the five aggregates, and it seems that in this passage too the terms should be understood in the same sense, as singulars meaning ‘subject to origination, etc.’” (S:B 1927 n178)

¹² For an insightful study of **the eightfold path**, see Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6).

- i. right view,
- ii. right intention,
- iii. right speech,
- iv. right action,
- v. right livelihood,
- vi. right effort,
- vii. right mindfulness,
- viii. right samadhi [concentration].

This is called the way leading to the cultivation of satipatthana.

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